

# The Ever-changing Role of Historians at the Denver Service Center

## A Retrospective

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**A**s public and private sector cultural resources management responsibilities have developed and grown in the past 25 years, professional career opportunities for historians have expanded. While the purpose of this article is not to describe those opportunities on a broad scale, it certainly is appropriate to examine the historians' contributions in one federal office as a case study of what might have occurred in similar situations. It may also be suggested that periodic internal re-organizations at this office have re-directed professional activities of its historians since the 1970s, illustrating in microcosm that significant change is occurring in the public sector. The work of the historians at the National Park Service's Denver Service Center in Colorado is indicative of the opportunities, challenges, and responsibilities of public and private sector historians who practice a different kind of history, a more mission-oriented approach, than that of their academic brethren.

The dawn of the 21st century provides an opportune time to examine the historians' professional contributions to the mission of the Denver Service Center during the past three decades. The office officially opened on November 15, 1971 when the existing Eastern and Western Design and Construction Offices (formerly located in Washington, DC and San Francisco) were relocated and unified into a single entity. As it did from the very start, the mission of the Denver Service Center continues to support the planning, design, and construction program of the National Park Service. The Denver Service Center employs a variety of professionals to undertake this mission including landscape architects, architects, archeologists, social scientists, graphics personnel, editors, contract specialists, engineers, planners, and others. This article will focus on the role of just one of these groups—historians—who are representative of the organizational expansion and structural change that all disciplines have experi-

enced at the Denver Service Center. (It should be noted that each discipline has a unique story and perspective.)

Since the 1970s, Denver Service Center historians have comprised the largest contingent assigned to a National Park Service office. The number of historians has ranged from four to more than 20. Almost all historians came to the Denver Service Center holding advanced degrees with various specialties reflecting a significant number of doctorates. During the 1970s and 1980s, these professionals evolved from their teaching and research backgrounds into public historians out of necessity to meet the Denver Service Center's ever-changing and challenging mission. Although comprising only a tiny percentage of total staffing, the historians' contributions have helped make this office noteworthy among the federal sector's technical support facilities.

As the Denver Service Center evolved in the early 1970s, the historians made significant contributions to the success of the National Park Service's Bicentennial planning, design, and construction programs. They produced historic resource studies, special history studies, and major portions of historic structure reports (see *NPS-28, Cultural Resource Management Guideline* for precise definitions of these studies and reports) to support the parks' Bicentennial programs. In the later 1970s, historians prepared administrative histories of individual parks and began serving as cultural resource specialists on park planning projects.

The various research projects helped fulfill the mission statement promulgated in the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act

...to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same....

This task required an intensive level of research of all aspects of American history employing primary sources and conducting exhaustive searches for historical documentation of events, persons,

or physical development of a structure, a development complex, or an entire park. This material was presented in written form for internal quality review and subsequent evaluation by recognized scholars in the field. The reports were revised based on these comments and used either by historic preservation specialists or park interpreters in their tasks. Over time, this work has changed and presently such exhaustive research is rarely assigned to the Denver Service Center. Instead, historians and other cultural resource specialists are deeply involved in conceptual general management plans that provide guidance for the overall management and development of each unit in the national park system, now totaling 379. The management actions contained in these documents are implemented over a 10- to 15-year period. In this endeavor, historians rely on their secondary sources while park, region, and contract historians conduct primary research. The Denver Service Center historians employ National Park Service guidelines and policies to develop various strategies for preserving and interpreting cultural resources within the parks. Since an Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment is often needed for either planning or construction design purposes, historians are equally involved in fulfilling the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and other legislation and policies affecting cultural resources. The historians consult with Indian tribes, federal and state agencies, and other entities to meet the legal requirements. This consultation is documented as required by regulations implementing the legislation.

Since the completion of the Bicentennial thrust in the mid-1970s, the historians have been melded into the mainstream Denver Service Center mission. They have been directed to assume diverse responsibilities previously considered the exclusive domain of technically-oriented disciplines such as landscape architecture, planning, and contracting. Additionally, it may be argued that management, usually comprised of more technically-inclined landscape architects and engineers, has shifted its perception of the historians' abilities to make significant contributions to the office's annual program. Beyond traditional research and writing assignments, management has directed historians to assume new responsibilities including compliance, cultural resource management, planning, contracting, and supervision.

Over the past 29 years, several office-wide reorganizations have re-defined the mission that the historians would undertake, a factor that has enhanced their individual contributions. Historians as well as historical architects were relocated from an initial stand-alone functionally-oriented historic preservation unit that existed in the initial 1972-1975 era into the geographically-based planning, design, and construction teams that operated in various configurations between 1975-1995. Presently the historians are assigned to a planning and design services unit. During the previous three decades, the Denver Service Center's structural framework has shifted back and forth from functional to geographical to a current day functional approach.

The office structure has definitely influenced what the historians do. For example, between the 1975 and a major 1985 reorganization, historians were assigned to the branches of historic preservation incorporated in five planning, design, and construction teams created to be congruent with then existing regional boundaries. Besides the historians, the historic preservation branches were comprised of historical architects, preservation specialists, landscape architects, and archeologists. Historians worked on stabilization, rehabilitation, and preservation projects throughout the national park system. They prepared special history studies, data sections for historic structure reports, historic furnishing studies, historic resource studies, and inventories of cultural resources for parks and other federal agencies.

Also during this interval, two small support units contained historians. From the mid-1970s to 1980, one or two historians were attached to the Quality Control and Compliance unit providing expertise on an office-wide basis to planners, designers, and construction personnel. Then, for a brief interval between mid-1978 to winter 1980, the National Park Service funded a Special Programs unit with two historians who worked on an interdisciplinary basis with planners, landscape architects, and natural resource specialists to evaluate potential new park units. Through additional structural tweaking around 1980-1981, Quality Control and Special Programs were absorbed into the existing geographic teams.

Thus, from the late 1970s-early 1980s, several historians worked as de facto planners and

assumed challenging responsibilities. These historians provided an integral component of the planning process as team members as they contributed to general management plans, development concept plans, land use plans, special resource studies, environmental assessments, and environmental impact statements. Periodically, some historians were assigned as team leaders for such projects. Historians through the years have presented their projects to Denver Service Center, park, and regional management, the Washington directorate, and congressional staff and members. On another front, a few historians focused their efforts as 106 compliance specialists to support planning, design, and construction projects. This work resulted from regulations that implemented the 1966 Historic Preservation Act, requiring federal agencies to inventory, evaluate, and plan for the protection and preservation of their significant cultural resources.

In 1999, historians along with archeologists and anthropologists were reclassified as cultural resource specialists, a job description that more accurately recognizes their current responsibilities. Historians continue their work on general management plans, environmental impact statements, and environmental assessments as well as cultural resource compliance and contracting responsibilities. They also deal with the expanding compliance function at the Denver Service Center. The historians labor with other planners, designers, and construction specialists to develop designs that meet the stringent requirements of the state historic preservation officers and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. Denver Service Center projects must comply with the laws, federal regulations, and National Park Service policies that help protect the nation's cultural patrimony. Historians' roles and responsibilities continue to evolve.

Some historians are taking the lead in contract management activities by arranging for contractors to assist with cultural resources and compliance responsibilities. Today, historians routinely facilitate the selection of private cultural resource and planning consultants, prepare scopes of work in their realm of expertise, guide the consultants' progress, review written products, participate in strategy meetings either locally or in the parks, and provide sign-off for completed products.

In addition to regular research, writing, planning, compliance, and contractual assign-

ments, the historians have published articles and books, prepared and presented papers at professional conferences, taught at in-house training courses, and instructed at local colleges and universities. They have made contributions as cultural resources management consultants to other federal, state, and local agencies as well as to the private sector. It must also be noted that Denver Service Center historians have contributed to numerous national, state, and local history and planning publications. Several historians have attained nationwide professional recognition in western history, social history, and urban studies. Throughout the years, numerous reports and studies based on primary research prepared by these public sector historians have been printed by publishing houses and sold to the public. In addition, many of these reports and studies have served as part of secondary works used by writers on various historical topics. For the most part, original historical research and writing has been relegated to the field offices and to contract historians. Some Denver Service Center historians have returned to the academy; several have successfully transferred to field positions in interpretation, cultural resource management, and park administration. Some have accepted positions with other federal, state, and local agencies as well as the private sector.

For more than a quarter century, the Denver Service Center's historians have been responsible for and have been successfully involved in helping promote the National Park Service's mission of providing for resource protection and visitor enjoyment of America's national parks. Thus, over the life span of the Denver Service Center, the historian cadre has moved far beyond the traditional focus of teaching and research history to become proficient at challenging and diverse technical responsibilities in the realm of cultural resources management. As long as the office continues to provide its technical expertise to the 379 parks throughout the national park system, the historians will continue to make significant contributions to the Denver Service Center in the 21st century.

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